
Fatherhood Program Forges Links Between Probation and the Faith Community

In 1994, Tom Mitchell, Assistant Chief Probation Officer for the Dedham District Court, had been working in the court system for a number of years. He had spoken to many juvenile defendants on probation who had no idea where their fathers were and who expressed either ambivalence or strong negative feelings about the fact that their fathers were not involved in their lives. The juveniles were not averse to having their fathers become involved, however. In speaking to fathers who were on probation, Tom tried to determine why they chose not to be involved in their children's lives. Many said that they had had problems with the child's mother or that, since they were involved in the criminal justice system, their children were better off without them.

Tom felt that, without fathers, youth fail to learn too many important lessons, and too many truths are not passed on to them. Because we are in the business of changing behavior, Tom thought that it was important to address these issues. His first call was to the Massachusetts Office of the Commissioner of Probation and Steve Bocko of the training department, who said there was nothing to prevent Tom from trying a "fatherhood program." This was the beginning of the program.

Why Fathers Are Important

There is no question that there was and is a need for this program or something like it. One-third of all youngsters between the ages of 6 and 15 do not have an active father in the home. In essence, this means that many young men grow up in homes that have no male role models, no one to show them what the role of a man should be in relation to his children, to women, or to society in general.

According to Jack Miller, family support manager for the Children's Trust Fund, children who have active male involvement in their lives have stronger coping and adapting skills, are better at problem-solving, stay in school longer, are more productive, and are less likely to engage in gender stereotyping. According to Miller, fathers also experience benefits when they are involved with their children: they have better health, higher self-esteem, and greater satisfaction at work. There also seems to be a link between absent fathers and anti-social behavior. In families without father figures, there are more pregnancies among young women, more hostility in young men, and more difficulties in school.

*by Bernard L. Fitzgerald,
Chief Probation Officer,
Dorchester District Court,
Dorchester, Massachusetts*

**Profile: The Fatherhood Program,
Dorchester, Massachusetts**

Partner agencies:
Dedham District Court
Dorchester Court
Asuza Christian Community

Purpose:
To change how men handle their parental responsibilities, with the hope of breaking the cycle that puts them in the criminal justice system.

Launched: 1997

Program Basics

The Fatherhood Program in Dorchester has been running since 1997. It operates in conjunction with the Asuza Christian Community, which provides a venue for the program at the Ella J. Baker House. Asuza also provides a member of the team of facilitators and makes refreshments available to the group when they meet. We have found that having the program in a location other than the courthouse helps probationers to feel more relaxed and eases them into contributing to the group.

The intent of the program is to emphasize to young men on probation the importance of being present in the lives of their children. It allows fathers on probation to share experiences about the importance of the responsibilities of fatherhood. We wanted to learn from them and for them to learn from one another. It is one of the most important things that we do as probation officers.

The program is built around five principles, and most of the 12 meetings are geared toward a presentation revolving around one or all of the principles. The principles are recited aloud by the group at the beginning of each meeting. The principles are as follows:

“As a father it is my responsibility to:

- ◆ Give affection to my children.
- ◆ Give gentle guidance to my children.
- ◆ Provide financial support to my children and to the mother of my children.
- ◆ Demonstrate respect at all times to the mother of my children.
- ◆ Set a proud example for my children by living within the law and without the taint of alcohol or drug abuse.”

After the recitation of the principles, we have what has come to be known as “rounds.” Each participant is asked to identify himself and tell the group how many children he has and what their ages are. The participants are then asked to speak briefly about some positive activity they engaged in with their children during the previous week. This portion of the meeting causes them to think about positive ways to interact with their children, as we spend time talking about what positive activities are. We try to discourage activities such as simply going to the movies or watching television or videos. The emphasis is on being proactive with the child and engaging him/her in the best possible ways.

Quite often during this part of the program, there is also a discussion of things that went wrong during the previous week. Group members will talk about conflicts that occurred during the previous week with the mothers of the children. At this time, the group gets involved in helping the conflicted party. This process helps, as others in the group who live in similar circumstances offer coping strate-

gies to the men who are having difficulty. In Dorchester, we have found that most of the men who participate in the Fatherhood Program have come from homes where their own fathers were not present in their lives. This is a learning experience for everyone. In a number of cases, the men are on probation for domestic violence, and there are relevant issues that revolve around custody, visitation, and the adjudication of paternity.

In having different speakers each week, we try to address the needs and concerns of the men in the group. For example, a clergyman spoke about the spiritual importance of fathers in the lives of their children. A probate and family court judge spoke on the issue of establishing paternity and the proper way to go about seeking visitation or custody rights. Recently, we had a social worker from the Division of Social Services, who spoke on the legal definition of physical abuse for a group of men who are unsure of what they can or cannot do when it comes to disciplining their children.

The main focus of the facilitators is to engage the participants in conversation about the issues of fatherhood. Perhaps the most important collateral issue that gets addressed in these groups is that of domestic violence. Again and again we hear stories from group members about what it was like growing up without a father and what they learned about the way women should be treated. It is a revelation to them when they hear during the discussions that there are other ways to deal with problems that arise in relationships between men and women.

What the Partners Gain

We know that the cycle of violence begins at an early age in the home, so this is very important work. We know from research by the Child Witness to Violence Project at Boston Medical Center that in Massachusetts alone last year there were 44,000 children who were witnesses to violence at home. It is also widely believed that those who commit violent acts were at one time either witnesses to or victims of violence. If our program can in any way contribute to breaking that cycle, then it is well worth the effort involved.

Our partners in the Asuza Christian Community and at the Ella J. Baker House have learned that, in addition to working with the children in the community, there is another important way for them to contribute to the spiritual health of the community: they can also help build a capacity to parent the children. Our partnership was easily formed, because we offer the faith-based community a controlled setting in which to meet a segment of the population with which they would normally have little or no contact. This provides them with an opportunity to strengthen the fabric of the community by working to strengthen families. Their mentoring of offenders also helps the criminal justice system, and in particular, community corrections, in meeting our goal of bringing about behavioral change. ■

For more information:

*Bernard L. Fitzgerald
Chief Probation Officer
Dorchester District Court
510 Washington Street
Dorchester, Massachusetts
02124*

Telephone: 617-288-9500 x304

Fax: 617-288-7430

E-mail:

fitzgerald_b@jud.state.ma.us